



# **FAMILIES AT SEA**

**National Maritime Museum  
San Francisco**

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**FAMILIES AT SEA**  
An Examination of the Rich Lore  
—of—  
“Lady Ships” and “Hen Frigates”  
Circa 1850 - 1900

by  
**Stephen A. Haller**  
Park Historian  
Golden Gate National Recreation Area

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An Examination of the Role of the Family

on "Lady Ships" and "Iron Frigates"

Circa 1850-1900

by

Stephen A. Miller

First Historian

Golden Gate National Recreation Area

## FAMILIES AT SEA

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PRODUCED TO ACCOMPANY AN EXHIBIT AT  
THE NATIONAL MARITIME MUSEUM, SAN FRANCISCO  
DECEMBER 22, 1984 TO SEPTEMBER 1, 1985

## Acknowledgements

This exhibit was a cooperative effort of the staff of the National Park Service, and was funded in part by the National Maritime Museum Association.

The National Maritime Museum wishes to sincerely thank the following institutions and individuals whose generous assistance and sharing of materials have made this exhibit possible:

Robert Weinstein  
Gene Barron  
Sherida Lembke  
Captain Harold Huycke

The exhibit was designed and executed by Stephen Canright, Richard Everett, Gus Block and the staff of the Maritime Unit, Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Except as noted, photographs were selected from the collections of the National Maritime Museum.

The author would like to thank the following people for their help and support during this project:

Glennie Wall  
Karl Kortum  
John Maounis  
David Hull







A flag pillow cover, embroidered by Mrs. Hulda Lembke on the Barkentine Newsboy in 1913.

(photo by Stephen A. Haller)

Running counter to the prevailing notion that a woman on board ship means bad luck is the fact that on as many as one quarter of all sailing ships in the second half of the last century the master's family joined him at sea. In many cases, the well-rounded influence of a family on board extended throughout the ship, and eased the brutality that often haunted the men before the mast. In her seagoing diary, Eliza Azalia Williams coins the term "Lady Ships" to refer to such vessels.<sup>1</sup> The phrase is apt, not only in reference to the presence of a Victorian lady, but also because of the humanizing effect such a presence had upon the atmosphere on board. For instance, there was Captain John Oliver Norton of Martha's Vineyard, of whom it was said, he was "willful and tyrannical," but that his seagoing wife, Charity, "could sometimes cause his temper to heel, and certain of her sympathies softened his tyranny completely."<sup>2</sup> The story is told in New Bedford folklore of the captain of a whaleship about to depart on a voyage.

"Captain Jones, you've forgotten to kiss your wife goodbye," some one hailed. "What's ailing her?" was his response. "I'm only going to be gone six months."<sup>3</sup>

When we consider that whaling was a business in which voyages often lasted as long as four years, we can understand the mythic captain's apparent callousness, and marvel that family life existed at all. No doubt, the phenomenon of sea-going families arose from the wish to avoid these long separations. Certain conditions of nineteenth century maritime commerce allowed that wish to be fulfilled.

The first record of a family on a whaling voyage was that of the Russels who shipped out of Nantucket in 1823. By 1850 it was estimated that one-sixth of the whaling fleet that wintered in Hawaiian waters were family vessels — a remarkable fact in view of the uniformly small size of whalers. On Dec. 22, 1889, *The New York Times* carried an estimate that one-fourth of sailing shipmasters in all American merchant trades carried their families aboard.<sup>4</sup>

Encouraging the growth of this trend was the gradual increase in size of vessels, and the concurrent growth in comfort of their accommodations for a family. As the far corners of the globe were charted and the rule of admiralty law extended, and as more regular trade routes were established, an ocean voyage became less hazardous. But the greatest influence on the phenomenon of families at sea was the nature of the ship's ownership. American sailing vessels of the period were commonly built for a group of merchants who had pooled their resources by buying shares of the ship in anticipation of her expected profits. It was usual for one of the major shareholders to be the ship's captain, and under these circumstances it was quite common for the master to bring his family with him. Young Fred B.

1. Dodson, Vita, "The Lady Ships," *The Log of Mystic Seaport*, vol. 36, no. 2, Summer 1984.

2. Whiting, Emma Mayhew and Hough, Henry Beetle, *Whaling Wives*, Boston, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1953, p. 34.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

4. Creighton, Margaret S., "The Captain's Children: Life in the Adult World of Whaling," *American Neptune*, July 1978, p. 203.



Duncan, who grew up at the turn of the century in the after cabin of the American ship *Florence*, recalls:

Some owners, such as those of the *Florence* were glad to have the captain's wife aboard. They believed that a man living contentedly with his family would take better care of their property and operate it more efficiently than a man without domestic ties. A man whose home moved with him was not so likely to live ashore in foreign ports, forgetting his responsibilities in forgetting his loneliness.<sup>5</sup>

It was during the second half of the nineteenth century that sea-going family life was in its prime. It was nurtured in the antebellum American whaling fleet skippered by men from Nantucket, New Bedford and Martha's Vineyard. Many of the wives these men took were themselves from whaling families. The tradition continued even after the center of gravity of American whaling moved to San Francisco in the 1880's and 1890's, at which time New England whaling captains such as Eugene Thaxter of the *Helen Mar* took their brides on the transcontinental railroad to board their commands on the West Coast.

The grain trade, a massive enterprise which brought hundreds of iron and steel-hulled square-riggers from Europe and wooden-hulled down-easters from New England to San Francisco Bay for cargoes of wheat, also brought prosperous Victorian families along in their after cabins. San Francisco's very own *Balclutha* was one of these grain traders — and a "lady ship" as well. Memorabilia of happy domestic life on board her is one of the features of this exhibit.

The American captain, Robert Tapley, left a vivid photographic record of family life with his wife Agnes and little "Baby Della" aboard the bark *St. James* as she rounded Cape Horn at the turn of the century. Not only are we allowed a revealing look into their chores, special amusements, and daily life, but among the images a particularly significant voyage is captured for all time. It was 1900, and the *St. James* was carrying the last load of general cargo from New York to San Francisco on a voyage that rang out the famous Cape Horn route, which was established by the clipper ships of the Gold Rush era.

The large American square-riggers were the aristocrats of sail, and they were planned from the start as family ships, with relatively large and finely appointed living quarters. These ships were usually the province of families considered well-fixed in their various seaport towns. By reason of their floating homes touching exotic ports, seagoing families became sophisticated in the ways of the world. In contrast, a somewhat less profitable but still comfortable living could also be made in one of the many coastal lumber schooners, most of which had "San Francisco" as a hailing port on their counters. Their cabins were not as richly furnished, the accommodations might be smaller, yet the attractions of shorter voyages, more frequent replenishment of the larder, and regular ports of call appealed to the strongly family-oriented Swedes, Danes, Finns, Norwegians and Germans of the Pacific Coast. These

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5. Duncan, Fred B., *Deepwater Family*, Pantheon Books, 1969, p. 41.



Full-dress Victorian finery is evident among the forest of masts, as this group is captured aboard one of many ships anchored in the Carquinez Straits, waiting to load California grain.

C9.14, 057n



immigrants entered the coastwise trade in such numbers that their vessels collectively became known as "The Scandinavian Navy." The three-masted schooner *C.A. Thayer*, now preserved at the Hyde Street Pier as a National Historic Landmark, was one of the many family ships in this trade. Between 1895 and 1919, Captains Gus Peterson, Fred Scott, Ole Lee, and Ole Monsen all maintained happy domestic lives aboard her. Later, when she entered the salt salmon trade, her owner "Whitehead Pete" Nelson took his pretty, young daughter Hilda with him to the salteries in Alaska.

Let us now look more closely at some of the particulars of families at sea. First of all, the privilege of having loved ones aboard belonged almost solely to the ship's master. The Victorian age was a class-conscious era, and the particularly rigid caste-system on shipboard left very little room for interaction between a master's family and the crew. This psychological gulf is vividly demonstrated when Abby Pennell, on board the ship *William Woodside* — with its crew forward and the mates at a respectful distance — laments that her husband, "John and I have to spend our Fourth [of July] all alone on the ocean."<sup>6</sup>

The captain's sense of isolation was relieved and his sense of responsibility made more palatable by having his wife at hand as a companion and confidant. His family was in turn spared the usual separation of having to be left ashore. Except for occasional religious services — almost always instigated by the captain or his wife and usually regarded with mixed feelings by the crew — there was little social interaction between fo'c's'le and after cabin. The family's world was that of the after cabin and poop deck, and with few exceptions, there they stayed. The family's closest association was likely to be with the mates, who had small rooms of their own in a separate part of the after cabin, and traditionally shared meals with the family, although the second mate usually ate at a second seating. Seagoing families thus accepted the chances of association with men who were more likely to have been chosen for their seamanship than for their gentlemanly qualities. One journal-keeper complained that:

If only we had decently civil officers, I should enjoy life. As it is there is but little enjoyment. All that induces me to endure is my husband's society.<sup>7</sup>

Maritime scholar Joanna C. Colcord, who grew up on shipboard and came from a long line of seafarers, remembers that seagoing families were unusually close-knit — a not-surprising fact considering how self-sufficient they had to be within the little world abaft the mizzenmast. Annie Holmes Ricketson, at home on the whaleship *A.R. Tucker* in 1871, lamented:

This has been a long day and everything is so quiet. Time does not pass so quickly aboard of a whale ship as it does at home, no getting ready and going to Church, no taking tea with a friend, no interesting meeting to go to in the evening and a nice pleasant walk home from the meeting.<sup>8</sup>

6. Coffin, Robert P. Tristram, *Captain Abby and Captain John*, The MacMillan Company, New York, 1939, p. 105.

7. Whiting and Hough, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

8. *The Journal of Annie Holmes Ricketson on the Whaleship A.R. Tucker, 1871-1874*, The Old Dartmouth Historical Society, New Bedford, Ma. 1958.



*Wilhelm Hester was a marine photographer who created a series of striking images of turn-of-the-century shipboard scenes in the Puget Sound area. Here we take in the breathtaking expanse of deck and rigging aboard the four-masted bark Mozambique, built in 1892, as the master and his family pose on the poop deck.*

F9.12, 383n



She was aboard a tiny vessel of 130 gross tons, one-third the size of the schooner C.A. *Thayer*. But for everyone who felt a loss, there was one who felt a corresponding gain: "Abby was happy in her knowledge of navigation and her husband. It took living alone on the ocean to bring out a husband."<sup>9</sup>

There were exceptions, however, to every rule, including that of separation between fo'c's'le and afterguard. On the British ship *John O'Gaunt* in 1877, Captain Thomas Yardley Powles, although a strict disciplinarian, was beloved for taking a real interest in the welfare of all hands. In unusual fashion, he made little distinction between fo'c's'le and aft cabin in his games and musical evenings:

Captain Powle and his wife were great musicians and always took a grand piano as well as a small organ to sea — thus *John O'Gaunt* and *James Kerr* were celebrated for their sing-songs. To the astonishment of the fo'c's'le hand who had not sailed with the "old man" before, all hands were invited to the saloon for the numerous ship's concerts. Though the typical sailing ship hand was both shy and sheepish at his first visit, he was soon won over by the kindness and good fellowship of Captain and Mrs. Powles, who treated everyone, high or low, with the same unfailing courtesy, liberality and kindness.

It is hardly to be wondered at that "the old man and his missus" were beloved by all on board. Mrs. Powles, indeed, was a true mother to the ship; she nursed the men when in trouble and even darned their socks.<sup>10</sup>

With real sailing ship seamen getting scarce and crews deteriorating in quality during the closing years of sail, it is not to be wondered at that strict discipline and brutality increased, and the threat of mutiny rose. These harsh facts also left their impressions on seagoing women and children. The wife of Captain Clark of the ill-fated Boston ship *Frank N. Thayer* stood by her husband's side as he fought off crazed, lance-wielding mutineers, bandaged his wounds, and sailed with him in an open boat towards rescue when their ship was lost. In another event, less bloody, but still likely to make a powerful impression on a young mind, the son of Captain F.C. Duncan on the American ship *Florence* recalls that while left aboard with mutineers,

We did not discuss the situation. Partly from pride, partly from an instinctive feeling that we must keep busy to sustain morale, we keep occupied with games and minor tasks, keeping our eye on the distant river mouth (whence help was expected). We were the Captain's children and it would be disgraceful to show fear.<sup>11</sup>

There is, of course, another side to the age-old tension between forward and aft. How crew members felt about the family on board is usually transmitted to us second hand through the reminiscences of that family. Fo'c's'le hands seldom kept a journal. It can be assumed — in the many cases where sailors were treated more civilly because there was a family aboard — that this circumstance was appreciated.

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9. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

10. Lubbock, Basil, *The Last of the Windjammers*, Vol. I, Brown, Son & Ferguson, Ltd., Glasgow, 1927, p. 46.

11. Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 151.



Hester captured a spirit of pride in this portrait of the afterguard of the bark Balmoral. Captain and Mrs. J.E. Roop and their young son are surrounded by a well-groomed set of officers. Everyone held still for the photographer, except the ship's dog!

P51.12, 341n



Sailors naturally curried favor with the "old lady" and the kids — with sincerity in most cases. The children often remember sailors for their little kindnesses — a little carved gift, some fancy knot-work, the sharing of some nautical skill.

Having a woman on board, however, could also be an intrusion and a cause for resentment. The children, unless strictly managed, could easily be in the way of some dangerous activity, making noise when one watch tried to sleep, or simply in sight when nature called and a sailor needed to hang over the rail or use the chute where the cooked dumped the slop. (Bathrooms for the crew were a luxury on board a sailing ship!) One journal that deals with the subject was kept by a mate who bitterly complains of the noise the children made, the insensitivity of the captain to the problem, the lack of privacy aboard and the interruptions caused by the family. Putting into a New Zealand port in the midst of the whaling season was apparently the last straw: "We came here for the express purpose to land the Capt's Cow, so she could calf again. . . .<sup>12</sup> In contrast to the phrase "Lady Ship" coined in the aft cabin, a vessel in which a woman interfered with the ship's work, pestered her husband, and upset the hands was referred to in the fo'c's'le as a "hen frigate." A captain's wife might even run the ship on a hen frigate.

Sir William Garthwaite, who operated the *Garthpool* — last merchant square-rigger under the British flag — was in his office interviewing a captain for a position on one of his sailing ships. The captain asked if his wife could join them. She asked a string of questions, all brisk, business-like, and to the point about the ship, tonnage, cargo, port, master's pay, and so on. Finally she asked if she might see the ship's plans.

Stabbing a forefinger on the print she demanded: "That charthouse on the poop deck — does she still carry it?"

She was told that there had been no alteration.

"Then we'll take her," she said firmly, without even turning to look at the Old Man, "if we can have the papers to sign . . ."

Afterward the owner asked, "And why did you decide the captain should take her?"

"The charthouse," was the prompt reply. "All my life it has been a dream of mine to have a ship with a house I could sit in and work my sewing machine, and keep an eye for'ard on the ship."<sup>13</sup>

Living conditions aboard sailing vessels varied widely. Maria C. Stover bemoaned the universal plague of sea-sickness: "My strength . . . is tested to its utmost the first two nights of rolling, pitching and

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12. Journal of Abram Briggs on the whaleship *Eliza Adams*, quoted in Creighton, Margaret S., "The Captain's Children: Life in the Adult World of Whaling," *American Neptune*, July 1978, p. 213.

13. Quoted in *Seabreezes*, by Karl Kortum, c. 1958.



The Tapley family has left us with one of the finest existing photographic records of family life at sea. These photographs, taken on board the American bark St. James around 1900, include a record of the last trip by a sailing ship with general cargo over the famous clipper route from New York to San Francisco. Captain Robert Tapley was accompanied by his wife Agnes, and his young daughter Adelaide, known as "Baby Della."

J9.24, 359.18n



laboring of the ship." Others could be exultant, as in Elizabeth G. Barber Barret's shipboard-written verse:

Tis joy to think that I am free  
As these wild winds far out at sea.<sup>14</sup>

The quality of food varied widely as well. For a short while after the ship left port, well-stocked larders yielded well-rounded meals, but after some time at sea the captain's family was forced to share salt meat in barrels, hardtack, and sometimes putrid water. Young Alice Rowe Snow of the British bark *Russel* recalls eating a lively sort of cracker she ruefully nicknamed "zoological biscuits" for the weevils in them. Live chickens, pigs, and even an occasional cow were kept on board to provide fresh eggs, meat, and milk. Captain Durkee of the *Balclutha* recalls:

We used to carry pigeons to sea, not only for food, but because they were great company flying over the ship, and, of course, got quite tame. If my wife were making the voyage with me, she would nearly always bring food with her when she came on deck, and it did not take long for the pigeons to know it. They would fly down all around her, a beautiful sight.<sup>15</sup>

The aft cabins that were seagoing families floating homes were small by shoreside standards, but comfortably furnished. In the journals of captains' wives, references abound to "snug little cabins" . . . "cozily fitted out" . . . and made as homey as the rolling of a ship and the necessity of the captain's business allowed. The woodjoiner's craft found high expression in the rich woods and fine workmanship that went into the cabin of a large deepwaterman, while the cabin of a coastal lumber schooner — though somewhat less spacious and certainly skimpier on ornamental hardwood — was still comfortable enough.

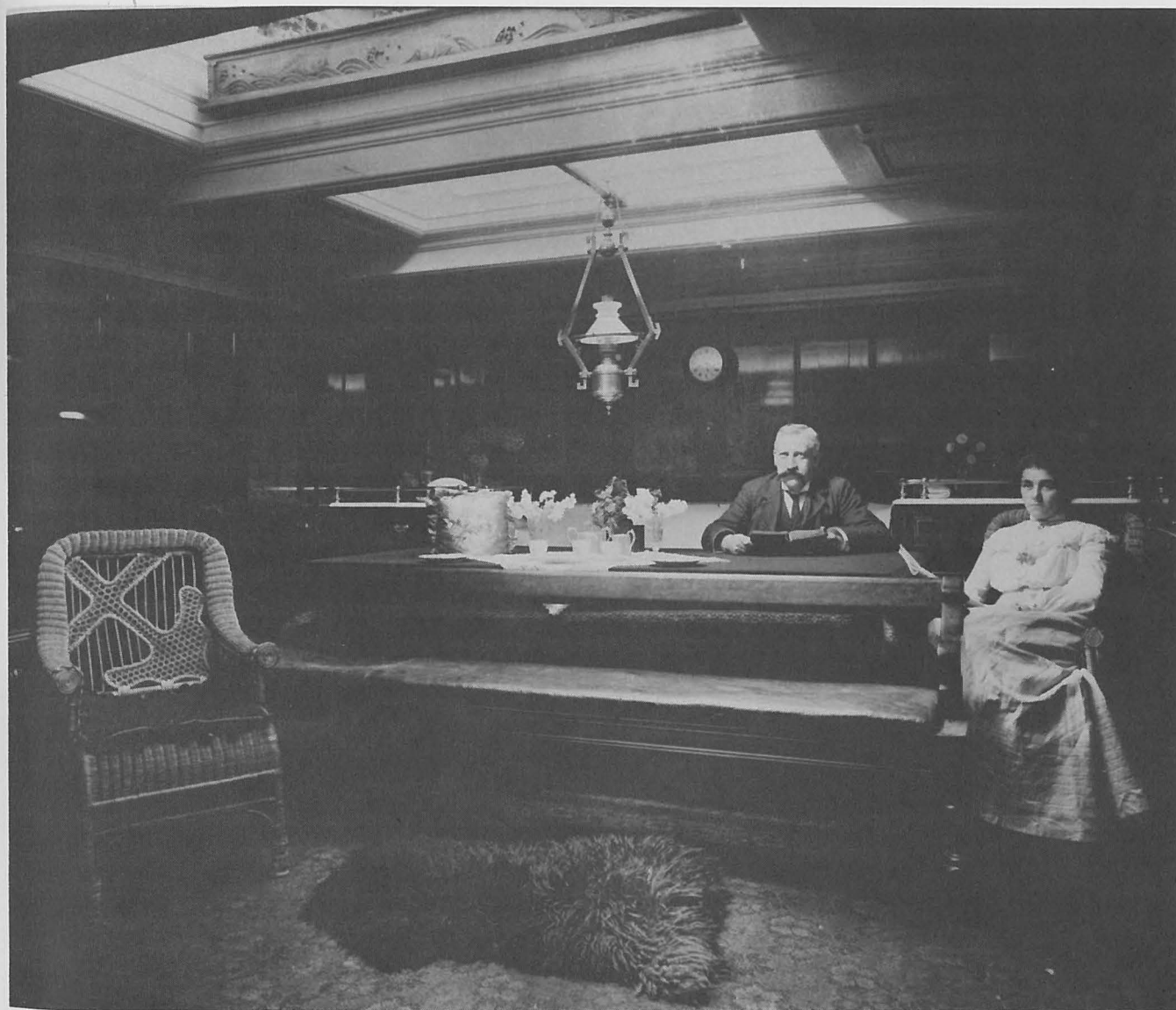
While at sea everything in the cabins had to be carefully secured against the rolling of the ship, but in between cruises the decorative was able to take precedence over the functional, and the full splendor of a Victorian parlor could assert itself.

The anchor dropped and the voyage ended. Mother, radiantly happy, made the final and greatest transformation from deep-sea to harbor life. Heading a work detail made up of my sisters and the steward, she accomplished a complete scene shift in the cabin. Now that heavy rolling was over until the next passage racks were put away and Father's navigational equipment was no longer to be seen. Table covers, doilies, fragile bits of glass and china appeared.

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14. Both quotes from Bonham, Julia C., "The Paradox of American Seafaring Women of the Nineteenth Century," *American Neptune*, July 1977, p. 203, 4.

15. Durkee, Capt. A.H., "Beating out of Bristol Channel in the Winter of '94: Ship *Balclutha*," A Ms. in the National Maritime Museum Library.



Hester was one of the very few photographers privileged to enter the world of the captain's cabin, probably because of the results he obtained. Here, he highlights a feeling of strength and quiet elegance by a sensitive use of light in the saloon of the 3-masted ship *Dudhope*.

U60.12, 473n



Mother's prized possessions once more saw the light and helped her make our little roving parlor as much as possible like that of the city home she had loved. Out of retirement came the Swiss music box that Father gave her as an engagement present, a Japanese tea set, an embossed photograph album that was full of pictures of self-conscious, carefully posed Duncans and Belchers. She had the steward take down the sea-going center lamp with the iron frame that held it in place and replaced it with an effeminate and delicate successor, an ornate table lamp with a shade of hobnail glass.

A moderate breeze at sea would have made a shambles of the room. It was the Victorian age, and she had conjured up a Victorian room, a fit setting for the teas she loved to give during a brief resumption of the social life she craved.<sup>16</sup>

Usually a large windjammer had both a cook and a steward to do the serving and housekeeping chores, leaving little in the way of housework for the lady of the ship to do except making the beds and doing the wash. The "old lady" might be busier in the more humble cabin of a coastal schooner. Nevertheless, cooking most often remained the province of the cook, and invasion of his galley was not normally welcomed. However it was not uncommon for the captain's wife to supplement the ship's fare with specialties that she cooked herself over a small primus-type stove in the steward's pantry aft.

Where time allowed and inclination led, wives learned nautical skills such as navigation. Music, needlepoint, sewing and writing were more common ways to creatively pass the time. Surely the story of families at sea could not now be told without the many journals that seagoing wives found time to keep. In port, the wait for a cargo might be a long one, and visiting neighboring ships did much to break the monotony. But perhaps the best cure for loneliness at sea was the gam. This occurred when whaling ships met, and it was possible to heave to for a while and exchange visits. The masters and their wives might be rowed over to the neighboring vessel to trade news, leave letters to mail, sometimes find fresh food, and revel in the change of company.

No corner of the ocean was too isolated to find Yankee ship captains and their wives in a gam. Even off the bleak shore of Siberia, Susan Folger Fisher of the whaling bark *Cowper* writes,

for the past week we have been rather dissipated, going visiting and receiving visitors. We have been in company with two ships, whose Captains had their wives, the *Phoenix* of Nantucket and the *Rodman* of New Bedford, I assure you we improved every opportunity that offered of being together, it really seemed delightful to have someone to talk with, besides getting whales and losing anchors, but the gam is up . . . in a few hours we will be miles apart so farewell female society for the present.<sup>17</sup>

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16. Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

17. Whiting and Hough, *op. cit.*, p. 31.



**Agnes Does the Wash**

Maritime historian Robert Weinstein observes that "when aloft, the sailor's maxim was, 'One hand for yourself, the other for the ship'; but while doing the laundry aboard the *St. James*, Agnes Tapley seems to be thinking, 'One eye on the wash, the other eye on Baby Della.' "

J9.24, 359.66n

In the isolated environment of a sailing ship, the matter-of-fact attitude towards pregnancy and childbirth is worthy of note. In spite of fears, it seems that birth at sea was no more dangerous than was birth on land at the time. Out of seventy births at sea in the populace of one small Maine town, there was only death. All six children of Captain and Mrs. William Blanchard of the Maine-built bark *Wealthy Pendleton* were born at sea. They put their experience to good use in Kobe, Japan, when they rowed over to a neighboring bark in a typhoon and helped the young couple aboard deliver their own baby.<sup>18</sup> Some seafaring children have "slid down the ways" in easier fashion. Captain Duncan of the *Florence* was on good terms with his ship's agent, so his ship was allowed to linger alongside the Green Street wharf in San Francisco the few days prior to the birth of his son, so that a doctor could be in attendance. Aware of the imminence of the blessed event, Captain Durkee shipped an Indian midwife aboard as the *Balclutha* left Calcutta with a cargo of gunnybags bound for San Francisco. On March 11, 1899, far off the lonely coast of Australia, a child was born to the delighted parents, who named her Inda Frances for the ports of call on her "maiden voyage." Little Inda's dress, and other domestic items which bring her shipboard family to life are a prominent display of this exhibit.

Childhood had its own rewards and surprises at sea. It certainly kept the wives busy. The very thought of a toddler along the dipping leeward rail of a sailing ship is enough to make any parent's heart leap to his mouth. The sailor's maxim, "One hand for yourself and the other for the ship," was no doubt modified by seagoing parents to "one hand for yourself and the other for the child!"<sup>19</sup> Common sense decreed that the young be restricted to the cabin unless held in hand by parents. The little daughter of Gus Peterson could crawl and slide about the cabin of the *C.A. Thayer* but could not walk at 22 months — not until she first got ashore. That very same day she was walking with assurance! Taking the opposite tack was young Alice Rowe Snow who got her sea legs early on the *Russel*. Little Alice screamed in terror when first ashore because there was no ship's deck rolling underfoot.

The *Balclutha*'s Captain Durkee recalls:

a little girl who learned to walk on board a sailing ship, and when she came ashore to a hotel it was very funny to watch her. She would take a step, then apparently wait, with her foot up, for the floor to roll so she could steady herself before taking another step. She was in the hotel quite a number of days before she could walk like other children.<sup>20</sup>

Obviously there was a wide gulf between social life afloat and ashore. Especially without siblings a child's life could be very self-contained. After being the only child in his little shipboard universe, James Earle who grew up on the famous Yankee whaler *Charles W. Morgan* remembered that it took "time and patience" for young seafarers to get used to companions. Often children were able to lose themselves in the fascinating world of shipboard activity, hobbies, and toys made for them by the

18. Colcord, Joanna C., "Domestic Life on an American Sailing Ships," *American Neptune*, July 1942, p. 194.

19. Weinstein, Robert, "Our Home was a Ship . . . on the Rolling Sea," *Museum Alliance*, L.A. County Museum, Summer 1970.

20. Durkee, *op. cit.*



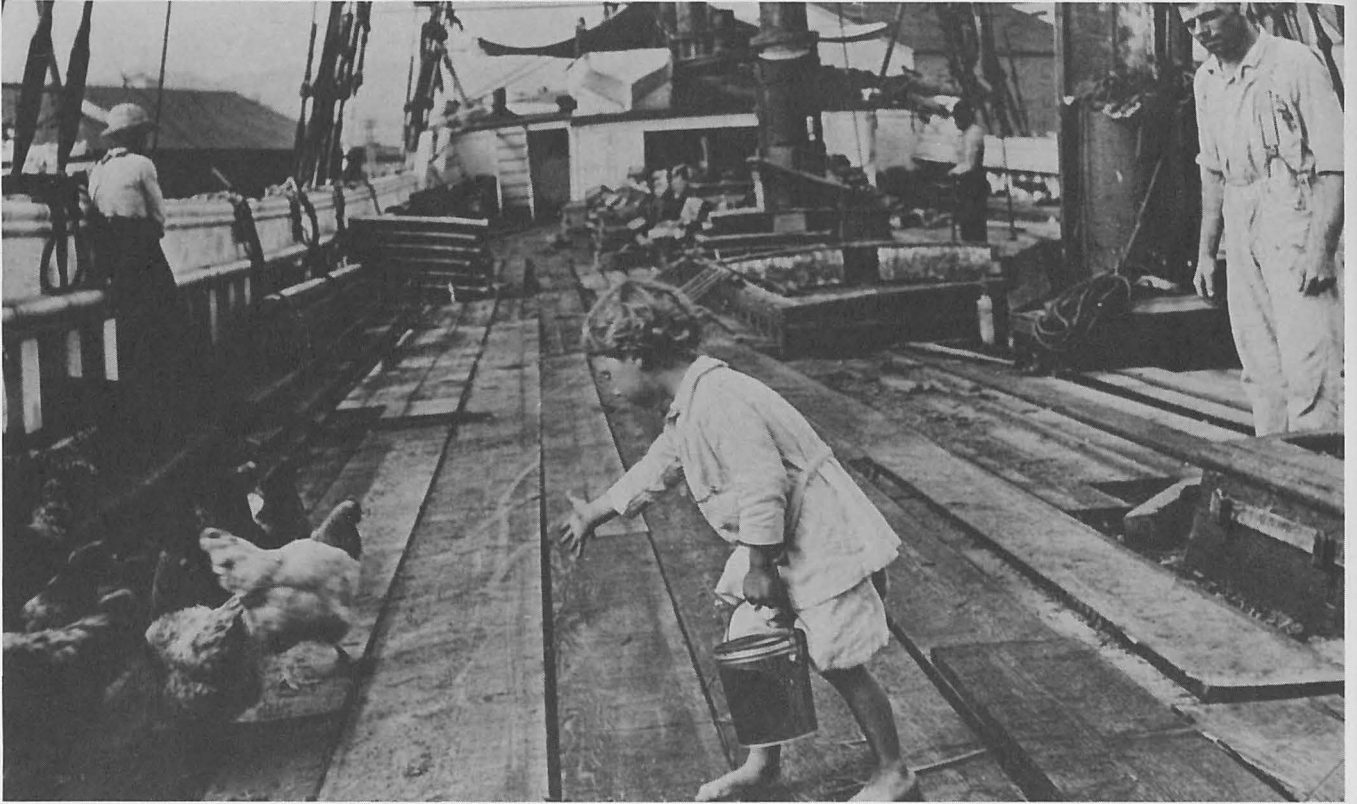


**Inda Francis Durkee's Baby Dress and Rosary**

*The child who wore this dress and rosary was born at sea aboard the ship Balclutha during a passage from India to San Francisco in 1899. She was delivered by an Indian midwife, and named for the voyage's ports-of-call.*

*(photo by Sharon Deveau)*





#### **Chickens on the Deck Load**

*Little Max Lembke, son of Captain Otto Lembke of the schooner Helene, feeds the chickens. They were carried for their fresh eggs, of course, as well as for an occasional holiday dinner. Schooners in the lumber trade carried a good part of their cargo lashed on deck. The flat top of the stack became, in effect, a temporary deck when the vessel was fully loaded.*

*K9.24, 335n*

ship's carpenter. On the *Florence*, young Fred Duncan had his toys stored in the wheelhouse next to the signal flags. On the other hand, the Peterson's little girl aboard the C.A. *Thayer* found "life no fun at all" at sea. She recalled,

I was so thrilled to get to San Francisco to get off this horrible boat! When the tug came and blew its whistle, it scared me so much I screamed and screamed, so they took me below. My father asked the tug captain not to blow the whistle unless they absolutely had to "because it scares my little girl."

Once ashore, though, she was anything but timid. In unconscious mimicry of an old salt having a spree on the Embarcadero, she would "just be wild" when allowed to play in the Emporium's children's playground. "The matron would ask my mother, 'What's wrong with that little girl?' and my mother would explain I'd just been out at sea and hadn't seen another child."<sup>21</sup>

Holding regular instruction on shipboard was one good way of providing worthwhile activity. It also allowed the off-duty mate to catch some uninterrupted sleep in his nearby cabin — a very important consideration. The education young seafaring scholars received ran the gamut from casual to intensive. When young Jaime Earle made two whaling voyages out of San Francisco in 1902-1904, bound for Japan in the *Charles W. Morgan*, his mother had consulted with teachers and came prepared with a regular curriculum from first through third grades. Young Alice Rowe Snow's mother taught her common school lessons, guitar music and sewing, while her father taught her how to box the compass, steer the ship and take a sight of the sun.

Organizations such as the American Seamen's Friends Society provided library lending service at various ports. Religious services and readings provided other quasi-educational opportunities. Certainly not to be overlooked were the tremendously broadening experiences that the families had in the "school of life." Speaking of the Captain's wife aboard *Florence*, her son comments that, "It must have been a startling, broadening experience for her. She had stepped outside of her conventional shielded life."<sup>22</sup>

The story of Captain John and Abby Pennell notes that:

The loneliest wastes of the Pacific saw Yankee captain's wives paying calls and drinking tea with one another as their ships stood hove to in spells of fair weather. Gossip of little Maine hamlets rippled out under coconut fronds in the velvety heat under the line. Wives mended their husband's trousers after an afternoon at the Palace of the Doges of Venice.<sup>23</sup>

21. Convs. with Mrs. Ward Maurer, June 25, 1965, an oral history tape on file at the library of the National Maritime Museum, San Francisco.

22. Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

23. Coffin, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

Certainly the seagoing life was, and is, anything but shielded. Disasters abounded — some have already been touched upon — and the families of seafarers had to share the dangers in full.

Mrs. B.C. Baker was the “old lady” on the bark *William H. Besse* in 1883, when she had the remarkable experience of witnessing the eruption of the volcanic island of Krakatoa in the Java Sea. She recalls the event, as the ship fought successfully for its life:

The air was so strong of sulphur [sic] that we battened down in the cabin, and every door closed. Lights were allowed only in the cabin and this in midday. Do you wonder that we thought that the Day of Judgement had come? Soon the wind began to blow and howl about us. Then the tide rose and rushed by us fearfully. Both anchors were down with 720 feet of chain each, yet so strong and high came that tidal wave that those chains stood like bars of iron, dragging for miles anchors, chains and vessel, threatening to snap their links, and send us to the same coral from which we came six week before.<sup>24</sup>

A disaster from which the vessel did not escape occurred in mid-Pacific in 1893 when the American bark *Lady Lampson* ran aground off Palmyra Island. The vessel had to be abandoned, and the crew took to two tiny boats. Captain and Mrs. Pederson, together with a surly and uncooperative first mate, and a crush of sailors spent a total of twenty-five cramped, hungry, and sunstruck days at sea until they made Hawaii, 1,600 miles distant, and were rescued. Mrs. Pederson had once nearly been washed overboard from a schooner in a storm off the California coast, but went to sea again because the *Lady Lampson*, at 412 gross tons, seemed relatively big, safe, and strong. This last experience was enough for her, for she vowed never to go to sea again. A waterproof tin letter box, with the words “*Lady Lampson*” on the side is a feature of the exhibit. One wonders what valuables were kept safe in it on that miserable open-boat voyage.

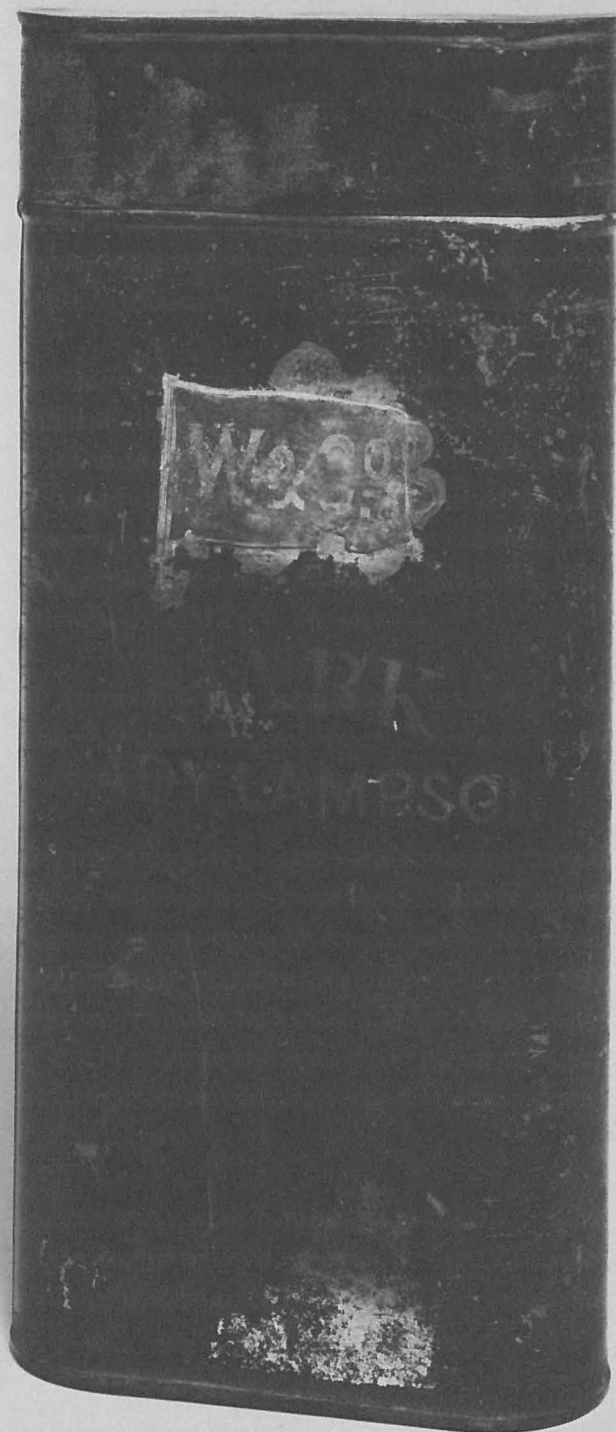
Caroline Mayhews, on board the bark *Powhattan* in 1847, nursed her husband and much of the crew through an epidemic of smallpox, and navigated the vessel to safety while the officers were laid low. But of all the instances of women’s heroism at sea, perhaps the most remarkable is the story of Mary Patten of *Neptune’s Car*.

Mary accompanied her husband on a voyage from New York to San Francisco in 1856. The *Neptune’s Car* was racing the clippers *Intrepid* and *Romance of the Seas*. Her husband had to relieve the first mate of duty early on for refusing to keep the ship on course. He was suspected of having wagered his fortune on one of the other clippers. Off Cape Horn, in the stormiest winter in years, Captain Patten fell seriously ill of “brain fever.” Nineteen-year-old Mary called the crew aft, explained that with their help she could save the ship, and announced her resolve to bring the cargo to nowhere but its proper destination. In spite of the efforts of the first mate to sway the crew against her and put in elsewhere,

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24. Baker, Mrs. B.C., “Reminiscences of a Voyage in the Bark *William H. Besse*,” in *Thirty Years of the American Neptune*, Ernest C. Dodge, ed., p. 31, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 1972.





#### **Document Case from the Ill-Fated Bark *Lady Lampson***

In January of 1893, the bark *Lady Lampson*, Captain John Pederson, struck an uncharted reef some 1,600 miles from the Hawaiian Islands. The crew, including Mrs. Pederson, took to the boats. After a harrowing twenty-five days, the captain's boat made Honolulu. The sufferings of Mrs. Pederson were especially intense. She spent most of the time sitting on the boat's bottom boards, wet to the waist, as the crew struggled to keep from swamping. This waterproof document case, carried in that boat, is perhaps the only surviving item of the vessel's gear. (photo by Sharon Deveau)



**Taking a Sight Aboard the Barkentine *Aurora***

*Here the mate backs up Mrs. Hansen for the noon sight. It was always best to take more than one sight simultaneously in order to cross-check for accuracy. This woman seems to know her business.*

J9.8059n

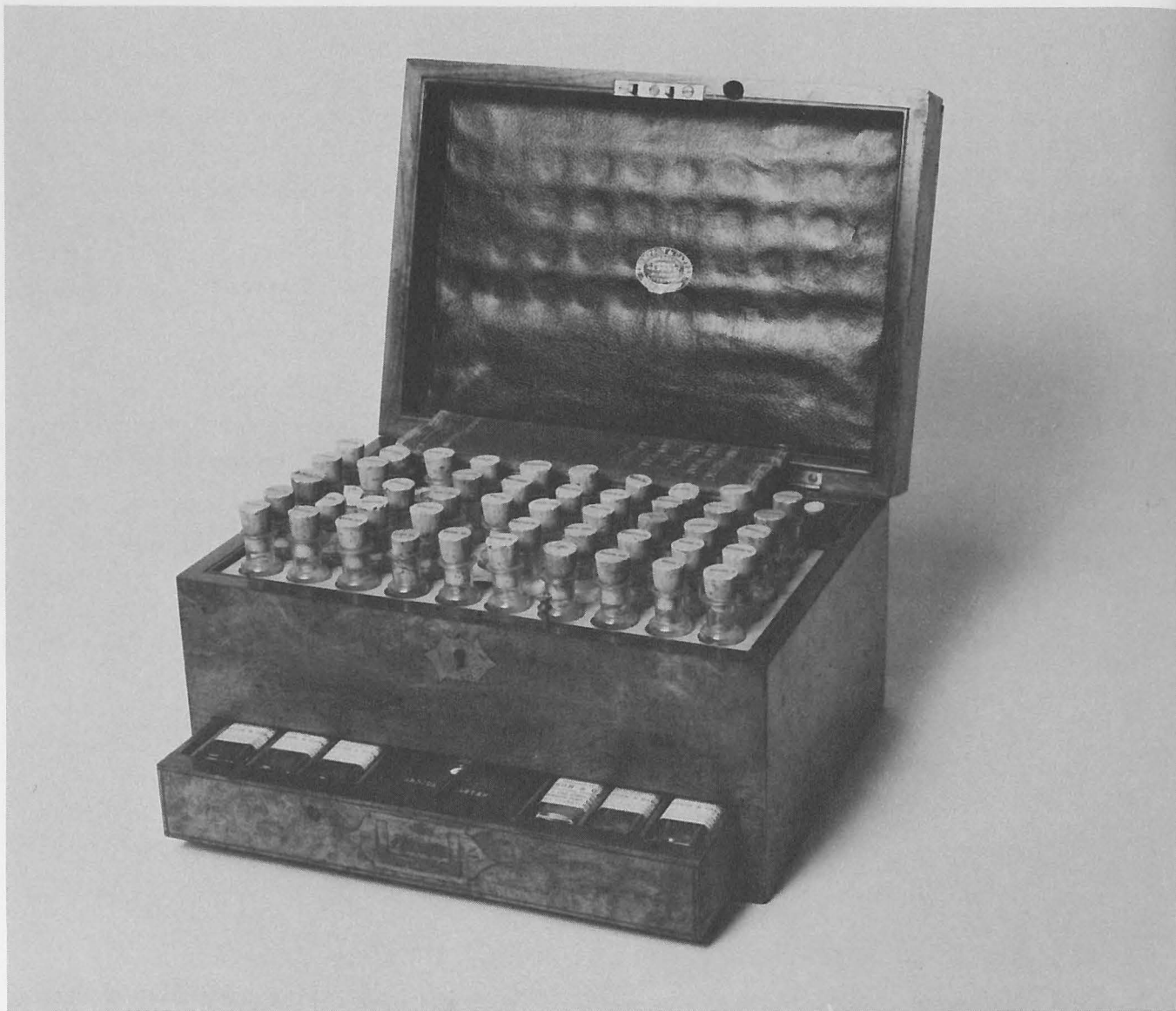
Mary retained command. She nursed her husband constantly, navigated the ship through stormy seas, and delivered the cargo safely in San Francisco. Moreover, *Neptune's Car* beat *Intrepid* through the Gate by eleven days! Young Mary was declared a heroine and rewarded handsomely, but the story does not have a happy ending. Her husband died in an asylum and our young heroine followed him within four years.

The joys and sorrows of families at sea varied as widely as life itself. No doubt, the attitudes of Victorian women about their lives varied just as widely. Most captain's wives, however, went to sea by choice. If not always from a desire for adventure, it might be out of fear that only a long separation from loved ones was worse than a long ocean voyage. These women were obviously anything but early-day wallflowers. We have an image of Victorian women as delicate, consumptive, retiring, dependent, and strict. The women of the Victorian era who went to sea did not necessarily conform to this stereotype. Just as significant is the apparent fact that sea captains did not necessarily treat their wives in conformity with our stereotypes either!

The phenomenon of families at sea died away as the fleets of old sailing ships dwindled. Steamers were corporate owned, and seldom did the skipper hold a share. In the steamship companies' way of doing business, there was no opportunity to bring a family aboard. The era of sail has increasing interest attached to it and thanks to that brief time when sea-going family life flourished, we can share memories of shipboard life through the eyes of a child and the viewpoint of women, as well as in the yarns of salty old men.







### **A Ship's Medicine Chest**

*The captain was usually the only medical authority aboard a merchant sailing vessel, and a chest of this sort was often the only medicine supply aboard. There are many reports of captains' wives assisting with the treatment of sick and injured seamen, often under the most difficult of conditions in a wildly rolling cabin. This particular chest was carried by Captain Josiah N. Knowles aboard the famous ship Glory of the Seas.*

*(photo by Sharon Deveau)*

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*This cabin mock-up captures some of the flavor of what was the center of shipboard family life. The cramped quarters are indicative of a relatively small vessel — perhaps a coastal schooner such as the one that appears in the small painting hanging over the piano. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, cabins in deepwater ships had become large and well fitted-out. Considerable time and expense were allowed for panelling and furnishing of the interior, one of the few places aboard that was not austere functional. When the vessel was in port, the full splendor of a Victorian parlor could be presented. At sea, the furnishings had to be simpler and firmly secured against motion.*

(photo by Stephen A. Haller)



## Artifacts on Display for "Families at Sea"

### *In the Cabin Mock-up:*

- Piano — an upright piano made by F. & C. Fisher that once was aboard the Schooner *Golden Shore* (Cat. no. 6957)
- Claw foot swivel stove from the Schooner *Golden Gate* (Cat. no. 6307)
- Desk and attached swivel chair (Cat. no. 8864)
- Wicker chair of Captain Leal (Cat. no. 7421)
- Stove from the Ferry *San Leandro* (Cat. no. 13354)
- Wooden Sewing Machine Case (Cat. no. 5582)
- Mirror and rack (Cat. no. 4630)
- Oriental area rug (Cat. no. 13328)
- Hanging Glass and bottle rack (Cat. no. 8647)
- Gilded metal bird cage (Cat. no. 6205)
- Framed painting of Schooner *John A.* (Cat. no. 1375)

### *In the display case:*

- Doll's bed, made by Capt. Josiah Knowles of the Clipper ship *Wild Wave* and *Glory of the Seas* (Cat. no. 7211)
- Doll with embroidered dress and petticoat belonged to Burgess Sorenson Cogill whose father was captain of the five-masted Schooner *Snow and Burgess* (Cat. nos. 12249-55)
- Stuffed teddy bear belonging to Electra Peterson Ross whose father named her after the bark *Electra* (Cat. no. 6236)
- Child's dress and rosary of Inda Francis Durkee born at sea aboard the Ship *Balclutha* (Cat. nos. 2869, 2797)
- Mrs. Alice Durkee's sewing basket from the Ship *Balclutha* (Cat. no. 2699)
- Embroidered handkerchief, by Mrs. Alice Durkee (Cat. no. 2706)
- Concertina owned by Capt. John Binnie of the Ship *Balclutha* (Cat. no. 2769)
- Medicine chest carried by Capt. Josiah Knowles aboard the Clipper ship *Glory of the Seas* (Cat. no. 2855)
- Metal picture frame with ornamental dragons, Schooner *Snow and Burgess* (Cat. no. 12689)

Spindle & Peg game in Walnut shell — of German origin (Cat. no. 13318)

Barometer, *Snow and Burgess* (Cat. no. 12690)

Ship's clock, *Snow and Burgess* (Cat. no. 12591)

Document case from the Bark *Lady Lampson* (Cat. no. 451)

Sextant owned by Capt. Albert H. Sorenson (Cat. no. 12693)

Parallel ruler owned by Capt. Albert H. Sorenson (Cat. no. 12692)

Domino set (Cat. no. 12292)

Flag pillow, embroidered by Mrs. Hulda Lembke, wife of the Captain of the Barkentine *Newsboy* (Cat. no. 13325)

Toy boat used by Max and Walter Lembke on the Schooner *Helene*, loaned by Sherida Lembke (Cat. nos. 13320-1)

Photo Album of Capt. and Mrs. Robert Tapley (P82-080)

Feather lei, loaned by Sherida Lembke (Cat. no. 13317)

Monogrammed towel and handkerchief, loaned by Sherida Lembke (Cat. nos. 13315, 4)





J. Porter Shaw Library